

On Writing While Middle-Aged

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The late, dearly-missed Victoria Wood once said that middle-age is when you see a pair of Dr Scholl sandals and think, ‘They look comfy.’ I lay similar importance on the first time you see a box of *Just for Men Touch of Grey* and feel a twinge of solidarity. You take to wearing slippers. You begin to think that maybe, just maybe, Centrist Dad might not be so bad a label so long as you can shift the Overton Window further greenwards. You realise a very close friend’s remark that ‘you’ve always been thirty’ now seems optimistic. Did I mention the slippers?

There’s worse. Songs that used to reek of pompous bombast now seem incisive and sweet – you find yourself with leaky eyes when *The Power of Love* plays on the radio because it seems insightful rather than trite. You read tweets and need a dictionary. You do a Yoga for Healthy Lower Backs course. You feel sensible for cooking big pans of stuff and freezing the leftovers. *You even look for matching Tupperware in Home Bargains.*

As a writer, this produces several opportunities and not a few challenges. Let’s do the latter first. As a species we have a negativity bias apparently, and so, Reader dearest, we may as well follow the programme.

Writing younger characters is hard, unless you situate them in the past, because you don’t know their cultural reference points. You don’t speak their language either literally or figuratively, or at least the ones their nonfictional counterparts use. So you have to try and find them out. As a research project it’s quite fun. But it’s galling nonetheless, not least because you realise how you are seen in their eyes. As far as I can make out, this is often quite patronising: like ‘ohmygod Billie Jean King is woke as fuck.’ She’s old, so who knew?

One twentysomething tweeter, in good faith, offered to *teach middle-aged people about gender*. Jesus. I was demonstrating and marching and staffing helplines and creating community groups on sexuality and gender issues before she was born.

Oh God. I just wrote ‘before she was born.’

Tackling the professional world as it is now can be counter-intuitive. Breaking into the world of the published novelist requires you to be a self-publicist in ways that would have made anyone who did them in my generation look conceited, but now it’s essential. If you’re not tweeting you don’t exist. So you have to learn not just new behaviours but also new tools,

and new ways of seeing that revolve around branding oneself as entertainment and/or a commodity in need of constant attention-grabbing and empty communication. I rather despise it. But I know I have to up my game in this regard. It's a resolution for next year.

On the plus side, as a middle-aged author you can write using a deeper and more complex palette than before. This is in part just because you've lived through more stuff than when you were 20, and that gives you more insight into the human condition. But it's also because you have greater empathy for a wider range of characters, and because you have the experience to distinguish between a faux or short-term crisis and something that gets close to the archetypal or perennial. This may be why the constant drive for sensation on social media seems not just shallow but ridiculous. And of course this has enormous potential for humour, in which I rather revel.

I also think writing at mid-life sees you produce greater numbers of sympathetic characters. In my second novel, I've written the protagonist's mother in a way I would never have attempted in my twenties or thirties; then she'd have been a figure of fun or empty chastisement, and now she's more layered, a rounded character whose suffering and tenacity lead her to a resolution with far greater promise of happiness than I'd have allowed in earlier decades. I'm rather fond of her despite her membership of UKIP. And if that doesn't show something important about me as a lifelong pro-European I'd be very surprised.